OPINION

BY SADIQ KARIM SOOFI

Critical thinking

THE goal of a humanities education, we've been told, is to cultivate critical thinking. But if critical thinking involves asking questions, scrutinising assumptions, and setting aside preconceived opinions, why should this be the ultimate end of the intellectual enterprise? The search for truth must offer something more than the inconclusive uncertainty of the critical thinker.

This is not to say that critical thinking is not a valuable ability to have. In any intellectual endeavour, critical thinking is indispensable. But it cannot and should not be the end of that endeavour. Why must a seeker of truth settle for a fleeting state of knowledge, remaining always ready to move to the next truth that comes his way?

The critical thinker who mistakes the mind's *ability* to think critically with the epistemic *state* of critical thinking, in which no beliefs are certain, and then considers this epistemic state as a desirable end goal, deprives himself of the fruits of certainty, without which human life is bound to remain incomplete and unfulfilled.

The true goal of a humanities education, and of any worthy intellectual enterprise, should be the cultivation of a human being of high moral standards. Moral nobility is not possible without moral clarity. And moral clarity needs epistemic certainty. The uncertainty and doubt that are fundamental characteristics of a state of critical thinking can only furnish a human being capable of having opinions, who finds many things 'fascinating' and 'interesting,' and who is open to all ideas.

But what about the man of conviction, whose moral belief is held with such certitude that it is compelled to turn into action? What was it that caused an outnumbered army to descend onto the field of Badr? What made a *Siddiq*, answering the call of his Prophet (PBUH), give up all he had ever owned? And why did the Imam of all martyrs refuse to relent before the sword that kissed his neck? Critical thinking can unsettle a man. But only certainty can send him into battle.

Iqbal once tragically proclaimed: "*qafila-i-hijaz mein aik Hussain bhi nahin*". In the shadow of Palestine, his words ring truer now than they ever have. The scepticism that has become the hallmark of critical thinking in the humanities has been a formidable weapon in modernity's assault on the kind of religious faith that cannot help but drip from the eyes of he who has it.

This modern scepticism can be traced back to Ren Descartes, a philosopher who decided that in order to know anything with any certainty, everything had to be doubted. Descartes' doubt then seeped into political thought, where our supposed inability to tell a true religion from a false one was used as a justification for the secular agenda of expunging all that is religious from all that is political. The reasoning ran thusly: we cannot know which religion is true, so we're better off making our political institutions neutral to this question.

In modern education, scepticism rears its head in the form of a humanities pedagogy that teaches children that all they can know with certainty is that they cannot know with certainty. In the classroom, there is no space for the teacher who dares instruct with the force of conviction. The modern teacher is a regurgitator of textbooks. When he comes to the classroom, he leaves his convictions at home, along with his humanity. At a time when young people need examples to emulate, they only find content-delivering instructors who are themselves devoid of all content.

The great trick of critical thinking is to make us believe that we have become critical of all forms of knowledge indiscriminately. But that is not true. Modern doubt first attacks our moral values, the unseen realities of our experience. The humanities, in which great questions are asked about these realities, are dealt the most fatal blow. In the scientific age, there can be no objective truth in what we cannot see. The material world becomes our most real reality — the only reality we can certainly know. Material wealth, the one idol beyond doubt, thus takes its place as the 'god' of modern civilisation.

> Moral nobility is not possible without moral clarity.

How far removed from the Islamic paradigm is modern critical thinking. The Quran begins by vanquishing the possibilities of scepticism: "this is the Book about which there is no doubt… ." (2:2). The highest stations of ethical knowledge are marked not by epistemic doubt but by epistemic certainty. In his autobiographical account in *The Deliverance from Error*, Imam Ghazali speaks of a kind of knowledge "to which no doubt clings," knowledge that comes with the impossibility of its uncertainty. To save ourselves and our world, we must seek this kind of knowledge. We must become critical of critical thinking. ■

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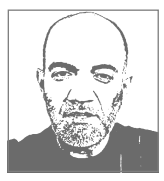

BY AASIM SAJJAD AKHTAR

Coercion & consent

IN the aftermath of the 27th Constitutional Amendment, there has been much conjecture about the increasingly dystopian direction of Pakistan's militarised polity. But to date there is no street mobilisation to reflect this ostensibly popular sentiment. At the risk of oversimplification, I submit that there are two related explanations for what is happening — or not — in Pakistani society and politics today: coercion and consent.

The coercion part of the story is well-known, but articulated in fragmentary ways. The party which clearly won the popular mandate in the February 2024 general election with its leader in jail was forcibly prevented from forming the government. It has continued to face waves of repression ever since.

But there are also other political and social forces contending with the coercive apparatus of the state. Take Ali Wazir, farcically jailed for more than two years, represents many residents of the Pakhtun tribal districts who have been resisting militarisation of their homelands for decades. The current hybrid regime has recently started naming and treating the Afghan Taliban as an adversary, but Ali Wazir and others who have warned of the blowback of the state's Afghan policy for decades remain in jail.

Then there is Mahrang Baloch, another voice from a peripheral region who has also been in jail for almost a year. She is pilloried as being a 'soft recruiter' for Baloch militants, but as is the case with political dissidents in this country, no concrete evidence has been presented to back up the allegation. Despite representing a wide cross-section of Baloch society, she is being met only with colonial statecraft.

There are many nameless others who face the big stick. Residents of *katchi abadis* and street vendors in metropolitan Pakistan routinely suffer eviction from their homes and livelihoods in the face of land grabs. Fishing communities, landless farmers and mountain dwellers face even more land, mineral, water and forest grabs in the peripheries. Blue- and white-collar workers who dare organise themselves in trade unions are fired and criminalised. Intellectuals who do not toe the line are silenced.

Seen thus, coercion is widespread. But there is little that binds the various social and political forces experiencing it together. Indeed, the ideological orientations of most dissenting groups are significantly opposed — the PTI, for instance, practised repression on leftists, worker-peasant formations and ethnic-nationalists when it was infamously on the 'same page' as the establishment.

This brings me to the consent part of the story. Systems of domination survive, and in fact, thrive, when they are able to ensure social control over enough of the population so that the ruling class can insulate itself from mass discontent. In Pakistan's case, this equates to a critical mass of society accepting or even supporting coercion against dissenters in the name of the 'greater national interest'.

But this does not mean that consenters are beneficiaries of the political and economic order. Consent can mean choosing silence for fear of coercion. It can also be explained by ideological influence, especially amongst educated segments of society — we saw many otherwise critically minded people fall in line behind the establishment after the military exchange with India in May.

Ultimately, however, consent cannot persist on the basis of ideology alone. Social control requires a material basis. When increasingly large numbers of ordinary people, who may not otherwise associate themselves with dissenters, fall into intense social and economic hardship, the system of domination rings hollow. Mass discontent bubbles below the surface in Pakistan today, even if it has not yet taken the form of organised politics except in some cases like the recent movement in AJK.

> Consent can mean choosing silence for fear of coercion.

The 27th Amendment has not triggered public protest because there is no obvious link between its passage and the everyday hardships faced by working people. The ideology that will ultimately challenge and transcend the political and economic order will centre the material needs of working masses while resisting increasing militarisation of state and society.

In a country where 170 million people are under the age of 25, almost 4m youth join the labour force every year, and where economic policy remains hostage to debt, mindless consumption and resource grabs by state functionaries and their cronies, there is every reason to believe that whatever little consent remains will erode rapidly. This will not necessarily generate a mass democratic impulse. But the other option — a slide into fascism — cannot be allowed to come to pass. ■

The writer teaches at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.

FROM THE PAST PAGES OF DAWN

1975 | Fifty years ago

Franco passes away

MADRID: Gen Francisco Franco, who ruled Spain with an iron hand for nearly four decades, died early today [Nov 20] at the age of 82 ... succumbing to a series of crippling ailments... . His death left Spain facing an uncertain political future under the leadership of his designated successor, Prince Juan Carlos de Borbon ... who will be proclaimed King… . The [Spanish] Government decreed 30 days of national mourning, closed schools for a week, and shut all Spanish stock exchanges for the rest of the week… . The ex-dictator's final request … said watchfulness and patriotism were essential to deal with "the enemies of Spain and Christian civilisation". — News agencies

[Meanwhile, as reported by news agencies from Islamabad,] Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto said ... that a time has come when Iran, Turkey and Pakistan should take a hard and deep look over all relevant factors in order to make a big jump in co-ordinating their internal and external policies for the benefit of the people. [He] was replying to questions by Turkish journalists covering President Fahri Koruturk's visit to Pakistan.

1950 | Seventy-five years ago

Birganj recaptured

NEW DELHI: A Nepalese Government Communique released from its Embassy … this evening [Nov 20] announced the recapture of Birganj, the stronghold of the rebel forces. "State troops are now en route to clear the last remaining pockets of rebels," the Communique added. It said: The only Nepalese village still in the hands of the rebels is Parasi, 95 miles west of Birganj on the Nepal-UP border."

It claimed "the raiders fled in panic before the slow but steady advance of state troops with innumerable casualties against two casualties in the state force". Birganj was captured by the insurgents on Nov 11, the day on which the runaway king of Nepal left his capital, Khatmandu, and reached [the] Bharati capital. —Delhi correspondent

[Meanwhile, according to news agencies in Karachi,] a legislative measure designed to make it compulsory for doctors under 32 years of age to undertake three years of "national service" under pain of punishment was introduced in Parliament yesterday [Nov 20]. The piloting Minister, Sardar Bahadur Khan, said that it was after considering every aspect of the "serious shortage" of qualified doctors … that the Government had decided to come forward with the present Bill… .

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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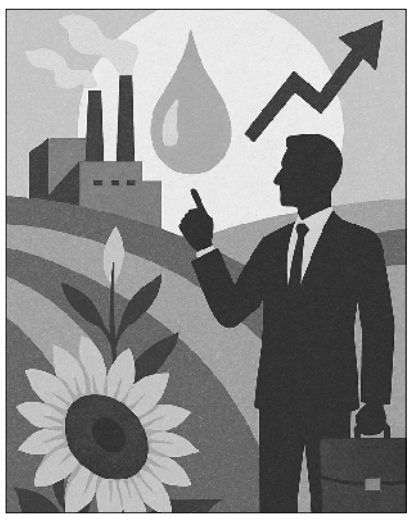
Letters may be edited for purposes of clarity and space. All letters should carry the writer's address, CNIC and phone numbers.

Time to revive the edible oil sector



PAKISTAN'S economy is deeply rooted in agriculture — a sector that is vital to our national growth, food security and rural livelihoods. Over the years, the critical sector has suffered from climate change, recurrent floods and inconsistent government policies. As a result, the country now relies heavily on imported food commodities, spending nearly $10 billion annually, half of which goes towards importing edible oil and oilseeds. This dependence is not alarming alone; it is unsustainable.

In the 1970s, Pakistan took an important step by establishing the Ghee Corporation of Pakistan (GCP) to promote local oilseed crops. Later, the World Bank-funded National Oilseed Development Project (NODP) was launched. These initiatives laid the groundwork for a self-reliant edible oil sector. Recognising the overlap between GCP and NODP, the Pakistan Oilseed Development Board (PODB) was created in 1994 to consolidate efforts in oilseed promotion, research and industry linkages.

By 2010, remarkable progress was made. by PODB. Farmers benefited from government support prices, soft loans and a stable procurement system. The industry thrived under rational tariff protections, while research institutions and seed suppliers ensured the timely availability of high-quality seeds. At its peak, the PODB fostered a productive partnership among farmers, industry and policymakers, which was a rare success story in Pakistan's agricultural landscape.

However, following the constitutional amendment in 2011, the PODB became a casualty of bureaucratic reshuffling and shrinking operations. As a result, local edible oil production has plummeted from 30 per cent to barely 10pc of the total national consumption.

Despite repeated directives from the office of the prime minister for a strategic development plan on edible oil production, the relevant ministry has struggled to take any coherent action. A consultant was hired earlier this year to draft a plan, but the process was abruptly cancelled without explanation. Such indecision suggests a troubling lack of vision and commitment. While the rest of the world invests in self-sufficiency and value addition, Pakistan's edible oil sector is being left to wither.

Reviving the edible oil sector needs a number of steps to reignite progress. PODB should be made fully functional, and it must coordinate policy, production and industry linkages across provinces, ensuring cooperation among all the stakeholders. Fresh agricultural graduates should be recruited and assigned specific targets for expanding oilseed acreage, improving yields, and adopting modern cultivation practices.

Provincial agriculture departments tend to prioritise wheat and sugarcane, leaving little room for oilseeds. Incentives, support prices and awareness campaigns should encourage farmers to diversify their efforts by opting for sunflower, canola, sesame and peanut cultivation.

Also, a rationalised tariff structure is essential to shield local farmers and processors from unfair competition caused by cheap import of oil and oilseeds. Oil palm initiatives in Sindh and Balochistan need to be revived under a unified national framework.

Pakistan's per capita consumption of edible oil exceeds 17kg annually. A public awareness campaign — in coordination with the relevant health authorities — can promote healthier and more sustainable consumption patterns.

Reviving this key sector of the national economy demands much more than just administrative adjustments; it requires a strong political will. If Pakistan is truly seeking to secure its future food security, it must breathe life back into the very institutions that once made it proud.

Ghulam Idris Khan
Former MD, PODB
Islamabad

Intercropping

IN Pakistan, where water scarcity and climate change continue to threaten agricultural sustainability, the technique of intercropping has emerged as a practical and efficient solution to enhance crop productivity and strengthen food security. Intercropping refers to the cultivation of two or more crop species simultaneously on the same field during a single growing season. The system ensures efficient utilisation of vital resources, such as soil nutrients, water and sunlight, leading to higher overall yields per unit of land. It remains a time-tested yet modern approach that boosts productivity and farm income.

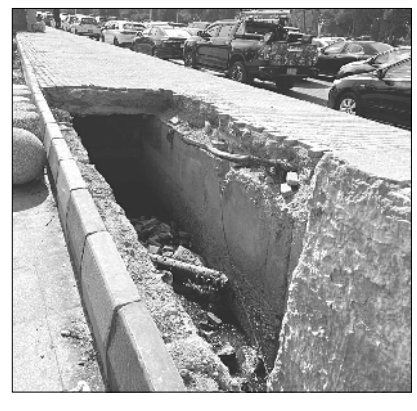
Sindh, despite having vast agricultural potential, faces increasing challenges due to limited water resources and erratic rainfall patterns linked to climate change. This calls for a transition from conventional monocropping to more adaptive and resource-efficient intercropping. Properly implemented, intercropping can serve as a game-changing practice for farmers. Although the system demands careful planning, timely management and commitment, the resulting gains makes it an attractive option for sustainable agricultural development.

The adoption of intercropping remains limited due to low farmer awareness. Farmers must adhere closely to schedules for sowing, irrigation and fertiliser application, as delays in one crop can negatively affect others. Farmers who have adopted sugarcane intercropping systems have seen significantly higher earnings. A range of short-duration crops, such as potato, tomato, onion, garlic, lentil, wheat, peas, mustard and sunflower, can be effectively integrated with sugarcane, depending on seasonal conditions.

To ensure successful outcomes, several key precautions must be followed. The intercrop should always be treated as a supplementary, not the dominant, crop aimed at generating additional income. Planting should occur in inter-row spaces, maintaining appropriate spacing to prevent excessive competition. Wider row spacing minimises intercrop competition, especially in sugarcane systems, where ridge planting benefits vegetables. Farmers should prefer short-stature, short-duration varieties to avoid yield suppression of the main crop.

To unlock full benefits of intercropping, coordinated efforts among policymakers, researchers and farmers are essential. Expanding intercropping practices, particularly by duly identifying suitable short-duration crops for integration, can transform the entire economic outlook of Sindh's rural farming communities.

Dr Nazar Gul and Hafiz Abdul Salam
Islamabad



A death trap

THE lengthy pavement along Khayaban-i-Saadi, opposite Boat Basin in the posh area of Clifton Block V in Karachi, has developed a rather huge and deep crater. This happens to be right across one of the most prestigious educational institutions of the city, and hundreds of students use the pavement every single day. This crater is a potential death trap just waiting for someone to accidentally fall into it.

The authorities concerned need to take immediate action to repair the pavement, and, indeed, many more in the area before any unpleasant incident takes place there.

Aamir Malik
Karachi

DHA in trouble

AS a resident of Defence Housing Authority (DHA) area in Karachi, I wish to share my deep frustration and disappointment with the current state of affairs in what once used to be a thriving community. Despite paying a variety of hefty taxes, the residents are forced to live with sub-par facilities and services.

The lack of regular water supply has become a norm, leaving residents with no choice but to rely on Cantonment Board Clifton (CBC), or the tanker mafia that charges rather exorbitant rates. This is not only financially draining, but also an act of gross injustice.

The absence of street lights on major streets and lanes has turned the entire neighbourhood into some sort of a haven for criminals, making it easy for them to commit crimes without the fear of getting caught. This pretty much explains the recent surge in mugging and robbery cases in the area.

The deplorable civic conditions in DHA is another area of major concern. Roads are not properly maintained, and the patch between Khayaban-i-Rahat and Neelum Colony is a perfect example of it. The numerous pits, holes and rough patches are causing utter damage to vehicles, and posing a serious risk to public safety. The open manholes on the roads are a ticking time bomb, waiting to cause a major accident. The haphazard placement of these manholes, often without covers, or raised above the road level, is a recipe for disaster. The garbage and trash removal system is also in a shambles, leading to the proliferation of flies and mosquitoes, which is a serious health hazard.

Last but not least, security issues are on the rise, with the DHA vigilance team more focused on penalising residents for minor infractions than addressing the worsening law and order situation.

It is high time the relevant authorities within the DHA woke up to the reality and took notice of the situation. As for the residents, they simply demand, and rightly so, immediate attention of all the stakeholders and a significant improvement in their living standards.

O.A. Khan
Karachi

▶ **GUNS IN UNIVERSITY:** Incidents of gunfire are becoming disturbingly frequent at the University of Sindh. Recently, two armed men opened fire near the Information Technology Department. When a courageous female student confronted them, they fired a bullet to silence her. Though she remained physically unharmed, the shock left her unconscious. Just days later, a similar incident took place near the International Relations Department. Such repeated acts of gun violence have shaken the sense of safety on the campus. Students now live in fear, and parents are growing increasingly hesitant in sending their children to the university. The presence of weapons on campuses is disgraceful and unacceptable.
Afreen
Hyderabad

▶ **DISTRUST CRISIS:** What has emerged to be a very serious issue is the trend of growing distrust among our youth towards their own country. Some destructive organisations are misusing social media to brainwash young minds, especially targeting youth in Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and now Sindh on religious and ethnic grounds. The government should take drastic steps to resolve the issue once and for all. Instead of using laws, like Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (Peca), as tools for political retribution, all such acts should focus on mitigating the real factors without at all compromising freedom of speech.
Muhammad Atif Jamali
Rawalpindi

▶ **A DESERVING WIN:** Under Abbas Afridi's leadership, Pakistan won the Hong Kong Sixes tournament, defeating Kuwait in the final to secure a record sixth title, the most in the tournament's history. Afridi starred with a blistering 52 off just 11 balls, including seven sixes, as Pakistan posted 136 runs. Despite Kuwait's explosive start of 32 runs in the first over, Pakistani bowlers — led by Mohammad Shahzad and Maaz Sadaqat — regained control to seal a 43-run victory. This triumph ended Pakistan's five previous final defeats and cemented their dominance in Hong Kong Sixes history.
Bakhtiyar Phullan
Turbat

External Ombudsman

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